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# From Otranto to Hogwarts: The Progression of Gothic as “Feminine” Literature

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From Otranto to Hogwarts: The Progression of Gothic as “Feminine” Literature

Stephanie Derochers

English 498

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## **Abstract**

This report will examine the progress of Gothic Literature, from its origins in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* to its current popularity in modern works such as the *Harry Potter Series*. It will focus on how the genre has developed as “feminine” literature, and how it has reflected the lives of its female audience over time.

## **Introduction**

For most of the genre's history, Gothic Literature has been forced into the unique position of having to justify its own existence. Viewed as creating a lesser art form by their poetic, academic contemporaries, the first Gothic authors were looked down upon for focusing on what many viewed as sensational, feminine literature that could not be enjoyed by an enlightened male audience. The budding genre that commanded a predominately domestic and female audience was summarily snubbed by a patriarchy that preferred its literature to be lofty and inherently masculine and women to be in the home, far away from anything that might cast doubt on the "cult of domesticity" and the concept of the "angel in the house." However, it is the exact trait of focusing on female perspectives and interests that makes the genre a perfect venue through which to study the lives of the women who made it commercially successful, despite Gothic Literature's dubious reputation. Modern readers can use the Gothic novels of previous ages to understand the lives and thoughts of women who were

ensconced behind the walls of domestic propriety and told to never speak a word of their own opinions. Thus, Gothic Literature becomes a voice for generations silenced by culture and tradition.

When Gothic Literature first emerged with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, critics sought a way to refer to this new genre that seemed determined to chronicle the female experience of fear in what was supposed to be a welcoming place. They chose "Gothic," believing that the "German tribes that had destroyed the Roman Empire" were well suited to lend their name "to describe a particular kind of novel, one in which terror helped drive the plot" (Ellis, "Female Empowerment" 8). Female Gothic theorists held that the new art form could portray the lives of their domestic counterparts in a way that more traditional, male dominated forms could not. While these more accepted mediums would simply continue to express male ideals, Gothic novels could accurately represent the female experience, as "women's repressed fears and desires - Gothic's twin fascinations - ... differed dramatically from those of their male counterparts" (Davison 32). As the genre progressed, Gothic Literature came to reflect the lives of its audience. Even though the novels have adapted to suit their ever changing audience, at their core they still maintain the foundation of drastic change through the sublime. They depict the powerlessness that women felt in their position as caged domestic angels. When women began to push for a more prominent role in directing their own lives, the genre adapted to display this push against tradition. Mainstream critics scorned Gothic authors for writing “feminine” literature, but the

tropes they so despised served as symbols for the real fears that women faced.

Although Gothic Literature's status as "feminine literature" was disparaged by critics, the genre reveals the thoughts and fears of generations of women who felt unable to express themselves to the men that dominated them.

## Position of Women in “Gothic” Times

The position generally held by women in the height of Gothic popularity was one of extreme restriction. Believed to be intrinsically beneath their male counterparts, “many women lived a life of misery and faced disease and early decay” (Yildirim 46-47). Gothic Literature reflects this pain, with its dark tones and terrifying male characters serving to express “the terror and rage that women experience within patriarchal social arrangements” that more accepted genres ignored (Williams 136).

Mainstream literature preferred to promote the socially acceptable idea of the domestic angel. These novels crafted a world in which “women were not allowed to go off on their own” and “resistance to parents or husbands, no matter how malicious these seeming pillars of patriarchy may be, leaves a typical heroine no alternative than to die with her virtue intact” (Ellis, “Female Empowerment” 9). The critically accepted novels of the time encouraged readers to “purge the home of license and lust and to establish it as a type of heaven on earth” (Ellis, *The Contested Castle* xii) Women were to remain at home, insulated from the outside by domesticity and obedience. These ideal women were believed to be the “moral guardian[s] of society,” perfectly capable of the

responsibilities of “the education and care of the children and the organization of the household as a whole.” Under this idea, “a woman was literally the servant of her children and husband, and she was required to be domestic, nurturing and docile” (Yildirim 46). The people of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century were so captivated by this concept, they proscribed to the cult of domesticity and judged women directly based on whether they possessed the meek, nurturing dispositions need to fulfill such an exacting role.

Those women who refused to bow to the expectations of their patriarchal society placed themselves in grave danger. Since a woman was “by law ... property of her father, husband or even brother” she could be harshly punished at any moment without any legal recourse (Yildirim 46). Women had few options other than to obey, as

surrounded by unfamiliar neighbors and underpaid servants, and with the home increasingly viewed as a private place where people could do as they wished without interference, the middle-class woman was not necessarily safe from male anger, and with her resources legally belonging to her husband she was not in a strong bargaining position.

(Ellis, *The Contested Castle* 9)

Any woman who went against her male relations was shunned by a society that favored male dominance, and with virtually no financial resources, left wholly dependent on her husband’s good will or the kindness of others for her survival.



## Foundations of Gothic Literature

More traditional critics believed that this movement from male dominated norms into new, inherently feminine territory would incite disobedience and the destruction of the period's carefully crafted culture. However, "the genre that Walpole launched, whose themes of terror, intrigue, mystery and grotesquery play out in ancient castles, does not symbolize the destruction of the old" as many feared (Ellis, "Female Empowerment" 8). In fact, the plots of Gothic novels usually feature a return to a better past in which the restrictions enacted by an overwhelming antagonist and the terror he produces in a female protagonist are destroyed. The power shift that occurs in Gothic novels is not that of a new tyranny, but rather a "restoration" of a previous, purer order that was "appropriated from below." By participating in this change, Gothic heroines were able to "gain a degree of power and control that the prevailing social order could not otherwise permit" (Ellis, "Female Empowerment" 8).

The foundation of this change is a movement through the sublime. This "experience grounded in pain, danger" and that "above all ... operates in a manner analogous to terror," allows Gothic heroines to move past the restrictions placed on them by their male oppressors (Moreno 421). The genre "generates suspense through the limitations imposed by the chosen point of view; we share both the heroine's often mistaken perceptions and her ignorance" (Williams 102). Through this point of view, the audience shares in the journey through the terror of the sublime. By undergoing

this journey through, these women are pushed past their own boundaries. They are forced to face their own fears, and through doing so become empowered figures capable of changing their environment for the better. Female Gothic Literature is founded on this notion of “terror [that] connotes an uplifting emotion, an elevated sense of self that resolves into a movement of transcendence” (Moreno 421). This transcendence moves Gothic women past their history of oppression, and into a new position of respect. It allows them to reclaim “an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil but has become the very opposite, a prison” (Ellis, *The Contested Castle* xiii). They transition from terrified figures who are simply trying to survive into women who have overcome their obstacles and are free of restrictive societal expectations.

## **Gothic as “Feminine” Literature**

This female freedom was a point of great concern for many of Gothic Literature’s detractors. The fact that these novels, which were almost exclusively directed toward a female audience, created “a resistance to an ideology that imprisons [women] even as it posits a sphere of safety for them” caused many critics to denounce the genre as going against traditional ideals (Ellis, *The Contested Castle* x). Any idea that went against the vaunted ‘cult of domesticity’ was viewed with extreme suspicion, and the fact that these novels implied that there might be flaws in the idea that women should be homemakers catering to the physical and moral needs of husband and children above all else led to a great deal of controversy.

Gothic novels were viewed as “sentimentalized tales of times past” that could only be enjoyed by women (Heiland 4). Many men believed that the Gothic genre was of no artistic or academic value. The idea that poems were more academically challenging than novels was widely ascribed to when the genre first began, and Gothic Literature was met with much skepticism by the patriarchal academic community. Poems were viewed as an extremely difficult medium to work due to their complex rhyme pattern and the importance placed on word choice, and were and thus seen as the perfect medium for male expression. Novels, on the other hand, were seen as simplistic since their authors were viewed as unable to condense the narrative into the extremely structured form of poetry and as such their work was more suited for women and children’s less intellectual consumption. Gothic’s focus on relating the female experience caused the genre to be seen as even less worthy than other novels and being dismissed as merely “feminine” literature.

This disparaging view of novels caused many men to believe that women should not be permitted to read for pleasure at all. It was thought that women should be “applauded for being passionate about the church, charitable works, and their maternal ‘duty’ but condemned for being passionate about knowledge, whether intellectual or sexual” (Fisk 134). Young women were to study about how to become the best possible ‘angel of the house’ for future spouses and discouraged from participating in reading, especially the works of controversial Gothic authors. Novels were

believed to foster dangerous sentiments in young women; reading in general ... was linked with ‘serious dangers to the female self, especially insanity and unchastity’, and novel-reading in particular ... was believed to ‘poison’ and ‘soften’ the female mind.

(Fisk, 134)

Many parents were encouraged to forbid their daughters from reading Gothic novels, to go so far as to confiscate novels. Despite these negative views, Gothic Literature was commercially successful due to the large female audience that was able to look past the genre’s detractors and was always ready for a new Gothic offering.

## Early Gothic Tropes

Early incarnations of Gothic Literature generally shared the same set of tropes that would appear again and again in different novels. These reoccurring themes and motifs unified the genre. The tropes of exotic locations, dangerous homes, and paranormal threats allow audiences distance from the events of the novel, while still depicting the feeling of constriction under patriarchal society that woman felt.

One of the most apparent of the early Gothic tropes is the exotic locations and characters that authors focus on. These stories take place “in a ‘dark’ past, the 15th or 16th century, and in a Catholic country, specifically Italy or France” (Ellis, “Female Empowerment” 9). This choice is a conscious one, as it lends the stories an air of

mystery while removing them from a familiar setting in which their push against patriarchal directives might be more unsettling for audiences. It is easier to accept a heroine’s choice “to reject the controlling demands of men: manipulative uncles, putative fathers, actual fathers who want to marry them off for financial gain” (Ellis, “Female Empowerment” 9) if such figures are not supposed to be close to home. Instead, early Gothic authors place them in “nature run wild, as seen in panoramas of soaring mountains, plunging rivers and atmospheric forests: sights that lifted a virtuous mind to thoughts of the creator and that served as a metaphor for the heroine’s inherent goodness” and thus excused her for going against patriarchal authority (Ellis, “Female Empowerment” 8).

While these Gothic locations were set in distant locations, they shared the fact that for the heroine, home was a dangerous place. In these novels, home is a terrifying place comprised of

crumbling castles as sites of terror, and on homeless protagonists who wander the face of the earth ... But it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually “fallen” men) are locked out, and others (usually “innocent” women) are locked in.

(Ellis, *The Contested Castle* ix)

For these characters, home is “a place of danger and imprisonment” in which those closest to them are the same people who seek to do the most harm (Ellis, *The Contested*

*Castle x*). The heroines are trapped in places that are “no longer safe, becoming the victims of a patriarchal authority which is the epitome of the masculine sublime” (Moreno 428). However, by the end of the novel they are able to overcome this imprisonment. In having women “purge the infected home and to establish a true one ... these novels provided a mediation between women’s experience of vulnerability and the ideological uses to which that experience was put” (Ellis, *The Contested Castle* xii).

Another key trope in early Gothic Literature was the threat of the supernatural. Early Gothic novels usually featured some sort of otherworldly force such as ghosts, demons, or religious miracles. These unknown forces helped to construct the narrative’s journey through the sublime, as they would inspire terror in both characters and an audience that had no idea what caused them. The cause of fantastic phenomena usually remains unexplained, as in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, in which mysterious items such as the floating portrait, the hermit’s prophesy, and the “fatal casque” that killed Conrad, sparking the events of the novel are never explained (Walpole 16). These mysterious happenings were simply accepted as part of the plot, contributing to the overall sense of the unknown that created the feeling of the sublime for both the characters and the audience.

## Origins of Gothic Literature

In its earliest incarnations, Gothic Literature focused on the idea of an idealized woman escaping from a man’s immoral desires into a loving marriage. These novels

incorporated the idea of the ‘angel in the house,’ but allowed her to escape in order to find another life of their own choosing. Unlike more traditional genres, women are rewarded for their resistance, as they are moving from the grasp of an unwanted suitor into marriage. Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Charlotte Dacre each incorporate this concept in their work to various degrees. As time progressed, their heroines were allowed to further push boundaries. Where Walpole featured women who still attempted to obey the dictates of the cult of domesticity in their relationship with Manfred, Radcliffe and Dacre feature more dynamic characters. Radcliffe’s heroines also attempt to follow these dictates, but their more active resistance makes this at times impossible. By the time Dacre published *Zofloya*, the genre was well established, allowing her to create a main character that at times actively goes against the idea of the domestic angel. These origins allowed for a new portrayal of women, one in which the domestic angel was allowed to actually become human.

### *The Castle of Otranto*

The genre of Gothic Literature began with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Although the novel does not contain some of the more apparent feminist ideas that later came to characterize the genre, and “Walpole can hardly be called a closet feminist,” it serves to establish the basic principles that will remain in place for his successors (Ellis, “Female Empowerment” 8). In all “feminine” Gothic Literature, the protagonist must break free of the tyranny of a male figure, either

through ending his hold over her, marriage to a rescuing hero, or death. Walpole displays each of these options as “Hippolita ... breaks free of her husband by seeking solace in a convent for the rest of her life,” “Isabella ... escapes the pursuit of Manfred, and marries [the] man she loves,” and “Matilda ... displays a type of autonomy before Manfred mistakenly kills her” (Ellis, “Female Empowerment” 8). Each woman’s escape from the vile Manfred is viewed as a release that the audience can appreciate. Walpole spends the entirety of the narrative describing the malicious deeds that Manfred is willing to commit on these women in order to maintain his unlawful hold on the Castle of Otranto, constantly terrifying audiences of what he will do if he ever succeeds in his goals. The emotional journey of the novel is one of trying to escape from the threat of a male aggressor by any means necessary. Those who are successful in this journey are rewarded with a happy life free of Manfred’s prescience.

### Ann Radcliffe

Ann Radcliffe, “whose five Gothic novels earned her the epithet, ‘the Shakespeare of Romance,’” would build off Walpole’s foundation in order to become one of the most definitive Gothic authors (Ellis, “Female Empowerment” 8). In her novels *The Sicilian Romance* and *The Romance of the Forest*, Radcliffe adapts Walpole’s notion of escape through protection of outside means into tales of frightened girls who flee horrid suitors only to end in the arms of their true love. Both heroines must flee from what they believe is a loving family, only to find that their male protectors are willing to



surrender them to terrible fates for personal gain. This type of journey resonated well with an audience that was usually forced to consent to an arranged marriage in order to benefit their male relations.

### *Zofloya*

Radcliffe’s definitive style would later be used as a measuring point for all other Gothic novelists. Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya* plays heavily on Radcliffe’s influence, serving as a “bridge between ... Radcliffe’s eighteenth-century psychological Female Gothic with its absent mothers and threatening-yet-distant Gothic hero-villains .... and the more visceral Female Gothic of the late twentieth century that features powerfully present and even homicidal mothers and hero-villains (Davison 35). In *Zofloya*, Dacre crafts an entirely new perspective on the Gothic heroine. Unlike her predecessors, the “lust-driven” Victoria is far from the picture of innocence. She is willing to do anything to take power over her own destiny, sacrificing three people “for the sake of this goal: Lilla’s elderly aunt chaperon, Victoria’s husband, and Lilla, Henriquez’s ‘pure and heavenly’ betrothed, an ideal feminine type and foil to Victoria (Davison 35). In pitting Lilla and Victoria against each other, Dacre comments on the vast differences between the one-dimensional ideal woman that tradition wanted to cast all women as and the flawed more realistic one whose prescience society sought to ignore. With Victoria, Dacre “offers up a compelling and realistic commentary on the vulnerability, irrationality, and enslaving obsession that frequently accompanies love” and challenges

the notion that women are inherently pure creatures that must be insulated from the outside world (Davison 39).

Dacre would also use *Zofloya* as a “commentary on the subject of marriage, which is literally infernal ... in the ultimate union of Victoria and Zofloya.” In doing so she walks a fine line, suggesting the negatives of marriage under the current patriarchal system but never outright stating that “patriarchy and its central institution, marriage, are literally nightmares, and that these nightmares are real, and fatally so” (Davison 37). Instead, she implies that husbands can quickly take complete, escapable control over even the strongest of women, since “Victoria’s now ‘constant companion and presumed lover’ ultimately reveals his triumph over her, declaring himself to be not only Victoria’s equal but her superior. Thus does the obsessed Victoria experience a horrifying shift in status from that of tyrannical master to terrified slave” (Davison 39).

The fact that Victoria, who for most of the novel was in complete control of her own life, is so quickly conquered reveals how completely husbands could seize control of their wives under the ‘cult of domesticity’. Until that point, Victoria had been “masculinised ... with her ‘strong though noble features, her dignified carriage, her authoritative tone – her boldness, her insensibility, [and] her violence’” (Davison 36). However, the instant she marries, she enters into a “compact with the devil ... one that Zofloya ultimately describes as involving ‘indissoluble bonds,’ an ironic suggestion in Victoria’s case, since she conceives of her marriage to Berenza as a form of slavery” (Davison, 38). Victoria’s marriage to Zofloya alters their relationship as she comes to

believe she cannot survive without him. This drastic shift “exposes love’s volatile nature” and “the intersection of love and terror” as Victoria is terrified of her groom and yet feels that she must marry him (Davison 39). Where previously she has had control over all her relationships, a married Victoria is stripped of the power to in any way direct her own path. “The symbolic ‘union’ of Victoria and Zofloya registers the fear of a force so culturally terrifying that it is invested with supernatural strength – female sexuality” and the patriarchal obsession with controlling this unknown through restrictive marriages and a ‘cult of domesticity’ that preached obedience to male figures and chastity above everything else (Davison, 42)

## Early Reactions to Gothic Literature

Early reactions to Gothic Literature were mixed, with those on both sides crediting the genre’s focus on the sublime with their opinion. Many mainstream readers and critics were outraged by the influence they believed it had on young women. This idea that Gothic novels would transform perfectly reasonable women into suspicious fools was echoed in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine Morland nearly loses Henry Tilney’s “entire regard” after giving into the “voluntary, self-created delusion” of Gothic notions (Austen 354). This potentially disastrous outcome of reading Gothic Literature was held as the ultimate fate of Gothic readers by many of the older generation, but young readers embraced the genre as providing a window into a life in which women could find happiness and a measure of autonomy. This young

audience would rapidly consume Gothic novels, making the genre a commercial success despite patriarchal views against it.

## **Victorian Britain**

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the culture surrounding Gothic Literature drastically changed. Although the principles of the cult of domesticity still reigned supreme, gender roles became even stricter in response to drastic economic changes. The middle class women that comprised the main audience base for Gothic Literature had few options, as “the confining nature of female existence in the early nineteenth-century” forbade them from moving outside the domestic sphere and patriarchal control (Davison 36). However, this growing audience was more open to their novels going directly against traditional norms, as a “bourgeoning nineteenth-century Western women’s movement” encouraged women to push against patriarchal dominance (Owsley 55). This “great age of English novel” transformed literature into “a powerful means of publicizing social issues” (Yildirim 53). Gothic authors capitalized on this climate of social upheaval, recounting tales of women who went directly against patriarchal standards.

Although early audience for Gothic literature possessed strict gender roles, “Victorian Britain, with its rigid gender roles, was a strictly patriarchal society where discrimination against women was a dogmatic practice” (Yildirim 46). Proponents of the cult of domesticity demanded increasing adherence to its principles in both public

and domestic spheres. Women were to create a “peaceful home” at all times, perfectly maintain every aspect of the household in order to suit the whims of male relations. If they wanted to escape this “nineteenth-century gender binary,” women were forced to “abdicate roles within the economic, religious, and educational institutions of her society,” and essentially agree to give up all ties to her past in order to join the lower class labour pool (Owsley 55). However, for middle-class women that had virtually no trade experience, the consequences of doing so would be devastating. A Victorian woman’s only choice was to try to embody the ideal of the ‘angel of the house.’

Those who failed to live up to patriarchal dictates faced a dark future, as “domestic and sexual violence was a serious problem during this period” (Yildirim 47). Victims of this violence had little recourse. The “Victorian ideology of gender rested on the belief that women were both physically and intellectually the inferior sex,” and few would even consider believing a woman’s allegation if the man opposed them (Yildirim 46). Even if she was believed, a woman’s continued position as the legal property of her abusers meant even admitted perpetrators faced few, if any, consequences. Instead, women were blamed for failing to live up to her male relation's expectations and thus avoiding warranting such punishment.

## **Opportunities for Victorian Women**

Escaping this circle of violence was nearly impossible, “as the oppressively gendered, patriarchal labour system” would not allow women who became laborers to

live in any sort of respectability (Owsley 55). For the middle class women who constituted the majority of Gothic Literature’s audience, the only option was to become a dependent. This dependency could be to a spouse, family member, or affluent employer, but in every case women were forced to entrust their entire life to the whims of another.

### Marriage

For most Victorian women, marriage was an inescapable fate. Daughters were routinely used in order to advance the economic and social status of their male relations through arranged marriage, submitting to “the loss of her civil identity and her property, present and future” for her family (Williams 138). Victorian women were essentially viewed as commodities. They were judged based on their ability to embody the ideal of an ‘angel of the house’ and the monetary and social benefits that connections between the two families would bring. Matches were arranged by based purely on familial advancement, and due to the era’s strict rules about gender separation, the couple would most likely never see each other without a chaperone before the new bride took her position in her husband’s household. Even in their new homes, women were treated as lesser beings, since

Although marriage was seen to be a matter of survival for Victorian women, it provided nothing more than a new household with growing responsibilities but no real benefits or security. A married woman was

legally the slave to her husband. She had virtually no rights over her destiny.

(Yildirim 47)

A new wife could attempt to gain an authoritative position in the “domestic hierarchy” by forging “alliances with wealthy men,” but there was nothing she could do to cement power into her own hands (Owsley 57). Upon her marriage, a woman was simply transferred from the control of her family into the control of her husband, becoming completely dependent on what was usually a virtual stranger.

### *Familial Dependent*

Any woman who could not secure a buyer on the marriage market was expected to “submit to her social destiny” and become beholden to the grace of more affluent family members for her care (Owsley 58). These ‘spinsters’ were seen as “poor and dependent” and were expected to act accordingly (Owsley 59). Such a woman was constantly reminded of her position by her benefactors in order to “elicit gratuity for even her most basic comforts, and to create an environment in which [she] ... functions as a second-class citizen (Owsley 60). These women were seen as existing in “a state of perpetual childhood” (Owsley 64). They had failed to complete the main goal of Victorian womanhood – to improve the lives of others through marriage. The punishment for such a failure was a lifetime of abject servitude. Even if a woman wanted to be free of her family and forge her own path through entering the workforce,

she would be “subjected to complete dependence despite her desire to earn money” (Owsley 60). A dependent was viewed as the most pitiful of creatures as “her state of individual personhood is altogether sacrificed in forced gratuity for even the most basic comforts, regardless of the fact that she ... [is] incapable of self-sufficiency” because of her family’s refusal to allow her to go into trade (Owsley 58). A dependent’s life “elicited only subtle, derisive teasing ... in lieu of genuine or authentic communication,” as she was viewed as an inherently less worthy person (Owsley 64). In the Victorian Era, there was a “perception [that] existence is the physical act of belonging to someone” and woman’s worth was determined by the “worth of whomever she belongs to” (Owsley 59).

### Governess

Women who dared to go into the work force could only become a governess if they wanted to maintain any semblance of their reputation since “working as a governess was one of the few acceptable jobs for a woman in Victorian England since it was not much different from the work performed by a housewife” (Yildirim 49). These women held a unique position in Victorian society, as they served

essential purpose by not threatening the Victorian gender roles because it allowed women to seek employment yet did not provide them with appropriate compensation or independence, thus reinforcing what John Stuart Mill called ‘the subjection of women’. As Brandon puts it, ‘during



the nineteenth century, as the newly rich English middle classes did their best to imitate aristocratic lifestyles, governessing became both a normal method of educating middle-class girls and a way of keeping destitute ladies off the streets’.

(Owsley 60)

A governess “fulfils a position within the home which oscillates between the two poles of familial nobility and paid servitude” and was thus the only occupation that middle class women could hope to take while maintaining some semblance of her former status. However, like her married and dependent contemporaries, “the governess [was] subject to forced evocation of gratuity” since “the structure of the Victorian labour system ... makes moot any attempt by women to gain personal agency (Owsley 57). Just as wives and familial dependents were forced to depend on others for the basics of survival, governesses were forced to trust her employer to “fulfil her physical needs through room and board as well as salary” (Owsley, 55).

A governess’s only freedom was to decide her own employer. After this decision had been made, she was virtually powerless. At any time they could choose to withhold “her earnings, as though competent financial reward for labour is merely an inconsequential formality for young, Victorian women.” Since employers treated “salary in the vein of a personal favour to be returned ... in the form of ... continued loyalty,” they could at any time leave their governess completely destitute, without any way of

contesting their actions (Owsley 55). Governesses were extremely aware of this, leading to “a collective unrest and dissatisfaction among Victorian middle-class women” (Owsley 62).

## **Victorian Gothic Tropes**

Victorian Gothic tropes were much closer to home than that of their early Gothic predecessors. The growing feminist movement allowed Gothic women to resist oppression in a much more visceral way, going directly against patriarchal mores in locations that seemed close to home. This immediacy allowed the audience to better connect with rebellious characters, and perhaps internalize some of the self-confidence and determination to decide their own fate that these Gothic protagonists present.

One thing that did remain constant was the presence of an oppressive male figure. In these novels “the extent of strict gender codes of the period” are revealed, as they portray “the ideal woman... [as] the one who follows the prescribed roles imposed by ... society if she wants to avoid trouble” (Yildirim 49). These patriarchal figures discouraged any sort of female self-determination, and attempted to dictate every part of Victorian womanhood. However, in Victorian Gothic novels, these male figures are often that of the romantic suitor. Where early Gothic antagonists were almost always a father or brother who wished to use their female relation for personal gain, Victorian oppressors were often over sexualized figures that refused to allow the woman they

were courting to determine her own fate, to the point that they would threaten “physical violence against her if she should leave” (Owsley 64).

While Victorian Gothic Literature did incorporate the influence of the supernatural seen in early incarnations of the genre, Victorian versions were more likely to be used as a plot device. Instead of utilizing the supernatural in order to generally frighten the protagonist and audience in an attempt to enhance their experience of the sublime, the Victorians applied supernatural phenomena as either symbols or a means through which to drive characters in a certain direction. In either case, the supernatural was viewed as a key aspect of the plot, as in the discovery of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or the mystical properties of the portrait in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

## **Gothic Literature in the Victorian Era**

These limited circumstances left middle class Victorian women with little control over their own fates. The women who constituted the majority of the Gothic audience feared for their own futures, as they could do little more than wait for the men around them to decide what their lives would be. Victorian Gothic Literature addressed these fears, empowering their heroines to push against male domination in a way that actual women felt they could not. Authors such as Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Thomas Hardy created female protagonists that dared to at least attempt to take charge of their own lives. Gothic heroines began to actively move away from the

dictates of the cult of domesticity, establishing themselves as intelligent, passionate, rebellious, and, at times, sexual women who would not accept someone else determining their fate. As time passed, these transgressions became progressively more severe, in some cases leading to the character’s ultimate demise.

### *Early Victorian Gothic: The Brontë Sisters*

Charlotte and Emily Brontë built off the foundations that Walpole, Radcliffe, and Dacre created in order to craft their own Gothic novels that moved beyond simply escaping tyrannical patriarchal author and into directly confronting it. In *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, they push against patriarchal norms, highlighting the “struggle to overcome the restraints of the period” their audience constantly faced (Yildirim 48).

#### *Jane Eyre*

With *Jane Eyre*, “Charlotte Brontë ... stands as one of the most remarkable voices against the traditional Victorian gender ideology” (Yildirim 48). Brontë showcases the limited options presented to women in the Nineteenth Century, presenting the women of *Jane Eyre* in “two not altogether distinct categories: women who rely on a wealthy husband for domestic comforts and women who rely on a wealthy, male employer for domestic survival” (Owsley 56). Jane’s desire to overcome her subservient position and take control of her own life has gained the novel a large following among feminist critics who exalt in the “exceedingly vocal views on the potential equity of marriage, ... lamentation of the restricted labour opportunities for

educated women, ... desire to expand ... intellectual integrity, and ... questioning of systemic religious practices that oppressed women and dignified men,” that Brontë infuses into the narrative (Owsley 55). Throughout the novel Jane attempts to find her own autonomy, pushing against the men who “bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually” (C. Brontë 9). Among a cast of women viewing life “from a gendered societal station which explicitly hinders agency and self-subjectivity,” Jane shines as a voice of reason who seeks self-improvement and the freedom to choose her own destiny (Owsley 56).

### *Wuthering Heights*

Emily Brontë chose to make her own stance much more subtle than that of her sister. In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë creates what is essentially a parody of Victorian gender ideals. Catherine’s dedication to living a proper aristocratic life and Heathcliff’s desire to marry the woman he loves at all costs would make them exemplary characters that epitomized Victorian ideals in the era’s mainstream novels. However, Brontë utilizes this fact to make a scathing commentary on Victorian society. Despite her love for Heathcliff, Catherine refuses to entertain any notion of marrying him after adopting patriarchal ideas of womanhood, as it “would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now” and she would rather live without love than marry a man she considers below her station (E. Brontë 90). These ‘ideal’ figures are far from happy, and their adherence to the image of Victorian ideals causes most of the troubles they face. Heathcliff and Catherine embody the surface level of Victorian ideology, but they never display the actual

morality that such a position was meant to convey. By making these polarizing characters, Brontë reveals the effects of blind obedience to ideals. Audiences are meant to look at Catherine and Heathcliff characters and thus gain an objective view of the morality that Victorian Britain espoused. Emily Brontë wanted her audience to see *Wuthering Heights* as what sorrows blind obedience to the dictates of the ‘cult of domesticity’ might cause. For the majority of their adult lives, Catherine and Heathcliff make themselves, and all those around them, miserable in their attempts to live up to what they believed people of their stations would do. It was only when they stepped away from the societal dictates, first in childhood and then in death, that they experienced any sort of joy.

### *Middle Victorian Gothic: Carmilla*

Le Fanu would step back from the controversial stance of the Brontë sisters, masking his own push against societal norms in a tale filled with the supernatural. *Carmilla* incorporates the paranormal to a degree not seen in many Victorian novels, using the supernatural as symbols for more mundane troubles faced by Victorian women. It absorbs the patriarchal fears of female sexuality, literally transforming a sexually aggressive female into a murderous beast. However, the novel also shows how a woman can overcome this monster within, as Laura is able to survive Carmilla. Much like Emily Brontë, Le Fanu uses an exaggerated version of male perception of female sexuality in order to make a point. Where Victorian patriarchal society had an “intense

dread of maternal and feminine sexuality as so viciously evil and unnatural as a force it rivals the blackness of Satan’s dark deed,” Le Fanu used *Carmilla* to point out the absurdity of these fears (Davison, 42). By depicting Carmilla as the epitome of everything they feared sexual women to be, he shows how unlikely their fears actually are. It is only in the most supernatural of settings that such a figure could exist, and Victorians needed to stop looking for her in their own daughters.

### *Late Victorian Gothic: Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

In his 1891 novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy pushed the boundaries further than any other Victorian author before him. With *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Hardy chronicles the demise of the titular Victorian woman due to the overwhelming pressure of the Victorian obsession with ‘morality’ and in doing so “questions the irrational social values that set the grounds for tragedies like the one experienced by Tess. Hypocrisy of the gender traditions, the injustice of social law, destructive morality standards and set of ethics designed to sustain male dominance are all held responsible” for her ultimate death, as the people around her cannot accept that she has been forced outside their definitions of morality through no fault of her own (Yildirim 49). Hardy “insists that Tess is pure,” but his definition “is much different from that of the strict virgo intacta which Victorian prudery demands” (Yildirim 50). The fact that “Tess explicitly challenges the norm by refusing to marry Alec after his atrocious assault” was absolutely shocking to Victorian audiences, who expected women to

submit to marrying their attackers in order to maintain the illusion of morality and to preserve their family’s reputation (Yildirim 49). Women were charged with maintaining their chastity at all costs, and were blamed for its loss, even in situations as the one Tess faces. For not marrying her rapist, Tess is found guilty of the sin of immorality and permanently cast out of respectable society.

Such an attitude is the direct “outcome of unrefined male oppression” (Yildirim 50). Patriarchal attitudes about female chastity were so ingrained that no one considers the events surround Tess’ loss of her chastity. Dominant males simply decided that the female was always at fault in sexual matters and refused to even consider the male actions that caused them. Due to this, Alec faces no consequences for his “disastrous seduction” (Yildirim 50). Victorian men were judged on a far different scale than their female counterparts, but refused to recognize the faulty logic in their double standards. Angel Clare, who professes to love her, abandons Tess upon learning of “the forced sexual intercourse” she suffered, even though he “is involved in a sexual relationship with a woman that he doesn’t know” (Yildirim 50). Tess, whose love for Angel “enveloped her as a photosphere” and “irradiated her into forgetfulness of her past sorrows” was willing to forgive him anything, yet he expected her to be perfect in all ways (Hardy 183). While Tess must simply accept that the man she loves has been sexually active with other women and instantly forgive him for such indiscretions, Angel feels no qualm in immediately abandoning her upon learning of Alec’s attack. Tess



losses everything through no fault of her own, but is blamed for it by a patriarchal society that refuses to admit the atrocities of own of their own.

## **Women in Contemporary Times**

Thanks in part to the women’s movement sparked in the Victorian Era, women no longer have to face the extreme version of patriarchal control seen in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. The strict gender roles, few opportunities, sexual repression, and extreme moral expectations that plagued Gothic Literature’s early and Victorian audiences have relaxed, leaving women with the freedom to openly express their opinions and determine their own lives to a degree never before seen. These freed women are thus able to use Gothic Literature to voice their new experiences in a world they can control.

## **Position of Gothic Literature in Contemporary Society**

Since women no longer face the outright oppression seen in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, Gothic Literature has been allowed to evolve past its strictly ‘feminine’ roots. No longer seen as something inherently less worthy than other forms of literature, the genre has again become extremely commercially popular, and in the process has gained a more diverse audience than ever before. Men have become much more accepting of the genre, allowing Gothic Literature to bridge the gap between sexes that caused previous generations such hardship. While many academic critics remain

skeptical of the academic merits of contemporary authors, the early and Victorian Gothic novels are increasingly used in academic study. Liberated women are spearheading this effort, with female authors some of the most successful contemporary Gothic novelists and critics. Although women no longer face the ‘cult of domesticity’ and the expectation of being the ‘angel in the house,’ they have not forgotten the genre that gave voice to those before them that were not so fortunate. They simply adapted Gothic Literature to depict the lives they experience every day, just as their predecessors did with darker times before them.

## **Contemporary Gothic Tropes**

As they no longer need to relate the hardships women face under an overtly patriarchal system, Gothic authors have been able to incorporate a variety of tropes seen in early and Victorian Gothic Literature into contemporary novels. They have restored the exotic and fantastic elements of early Gothic Literature by incorporating them into the familiar locations seen in Victorian Gothic novels. This has led to accounts of supernatural events that occur close to home. Gothic protagonists are thus more likely to be normal people who stumble into an unbelievable new world they did not know existed in conjunction with their own. This new intimacy with the supernatural world is the major contribution of contemporary writers to the genre. It creates a sense of the Gothic world being closer to the real one than ever before, an idea that has captured contemporary audiences. Gothic Literature has become a major part of

contemporary culture due to this intimacy, as the audience can interact with novels in ways that previous generations could never hope to.

## Contemporary Gothic Literature

Contemporary Gothic authors are able to promote women in a way that previous authors were unable to do. Since women were seen as inherently inferior in previous generation, authors had to dedicate time to establish them as reliable, knowledgeable characters. However, as this attitude receded, female Gothic characters were able to show more about their personality as they had more time develop fully rounded characters with flaws, strengths, and ambitions since women were expected to be more complex by an audience that views women as equal with their male counterparts.

It is only in this environment that J.K. Rowling could create a character such as Hermione Granger, ‘the brightest witch of her age,’ who is instrumental in Harry Potter’s success both as a character and as a series. Hermione serves as the result of two centuries of Gothic writing. She fulfills the genre’s hope of creating a female character that could command respect and recognition from her male counterparts and take control of her own destiny. In *Harry Potter*, Rowling unifies the various aspects of Gothic Literature, creating a mysterious world that imbues its inhabitants with a power, confidence, and sense of autonomy they never expected to possess.

With its soaring towers, secrete passageways, and wandering ghosts, Hogwarts makes a fitting heir to the Castle of Otranto, even while rethinking it for an audience vastly different from Walpole’s. Rowlings takes the classic image of the Gothic castle and reshapes it into a place of absolute wonder instead of abject fear.

## Conclusion

As the genre has developed, Gothic Literature has taken audiences on a journey through the unknown and into a heightened sense of self that would not be possible without a harrowing trip through the sublime. From the terrors of being unable to escape from a tyrannical male relation in early Gothic Literature to the defiance of patriarchal values in the Victorian Era, Gothic Literature has always attempted to give voices to women who felt powerless to speak up for themselves. In many cases, these women feared for their very safety every minute of the day, even in their own homes. They had no power to control their own fate, and their lack of autonomy was blamed on their own frailty instead of the male need for dominance that actually inspired these restrictions.

Gothic authors sought to confront this injustice in some small way, pointing out the hypocrisy of patriarchal society and the ‘cult of domesticity’. In return their work was dismissed as simply “feminine,” a term that completely devalued their novels and made reading them a thing a derision. However, Gothic authors continued to write, bringing joy to audiences that had little else to look forward to. The tropes they created

fascinated, described, and entertained women with the glimpse they gave of better lives in which women could control their own destinies, at least to some small degree.

Modern Gothic novelists have continued this trend, although the growing popularity of the genre has allowed them to touch the lives of far more than just terrified young girls. The genre is now viewed as more than just “feminine” literature, but the term that was meant to be derogatory actually in some ways accurately described the genre. At its core, Gothic Literature is “feminine” – it gives a voice to women, inspired them to believe in themselves and to push for their dreams, and gives them a voice when they cannot speak for themselves.

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